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SUBJECT: DAS SWAN'S VISIT TO CAMEROON: RIOTS, THE CONSTITUTION, AND THE ECONOMY

REF: A. YAOUNDE 209

¶B. YAOUNDE 211

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

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¶11. (C) Summary: During a March 7-9 visit to Yaounde and Douala, DAS Jim Swan met with President Biya, other senior government officials and representatives of business, media and civil society. Publicly and privately, Swan expressed USG concerns about Cameroon's recent riots, President Biya's plans to eliminate term limits, and recent restrictions on media freedom (reflets). President Biya described the country as "very fragile" and justified his plans to change the constitution in the context of internal party politics, public demands for change, and African cultural traditions. Other senior officials defended Biya's desire to leave open the option of remaining in power beyond 2011, although they said the President may not run in the next election. They saw socio-economic frustrations as the root cause of the recent riots. Civil society and business contacts spewed cynicism and frustration about the Biya government, highlighting concerns that submission of the constitutional amendment to parliament (which some believe is imminent) could spark renewed unrest. The French are confident Biya's action has quelled the recent unrest, but are concerned about longer-term instability. The EU is preparing a common position on Cameroon that will emphasize the need for free and fair elections in 2011. While Swan's message was well received by both the government and civil society, Biya nonetheless appears determined to go ahead with eliminating term limits, which may usher in a period of political turbulence in the country. End summary.

The DAS' Message

¶12. (U) DAS Swan's public message for the visit was: we respect Cameroon's sovereignty and appreciate our strong bilateral relationship and historical friendship. As friends, we are concerned about the recent violence and deplore the resulting loss of life (note: three days of riots February 25-27 left at least 40 dead and caused damage in five provinces, as reported reftel. end note.) Swan noted that in a spirit of friendship, we have offered our view that, in our experience, term limits are healthy for democratic renewal and beneficial for institutionalizing peaceful transfers of power in emerging democracies. He reiterated that we believe changing a constitution should be done through a process of inclusive national dialogue. Swan

noted the importance of a free press and due process for those arrested after the recent riots.

¶3. (C) In his private meetings, Swan appealed to Biya's desire for a legacy of democratic development and prosperity.

We were confident that, after 25 years in power, Biya is capable of managing the transition without having to eliminate term limits, Swan said. While we understood the President saw the constitutional change as a way to reduce internal Cabinet friction and we recognized the shortcomings of the current succession mechanisms, we were concerned that eliminating term limits could potentially transfer the unrest from within the ruling circle to the broader society. The DAS also underlined the importance of good elections and thanked the GRC for its recent assistance with the evacuation of our Mission personnel from Chad.

Meeting with President Biya

¶4. (C) In a March 9 meeting, President Biya made the following points to the DAS (at Biya's request, the meeting was one-on-one):

The Recent Violence: Biya saw the recent riots as rooted largely in socio-economic concerns, downplaying political factors. He was concerned that in many cases children were put in front of demonstrations. He was pleased with the professionalism of his security forces during this period, who had orders not to shoot. Turning to measures announced on March 7 to raise public sector salaries and cut taxes on some food items, he said he had met with an IMF team visiting the country at the time and that they agreed to these measures.

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Freedoms: Biya said Equinoxe TV and radio and Magic FM radio would be allowed to resume operations if they made firm "engagements" to be more responsible. Almost all of the 1671 people detained as a result of the recent violence would be released, he said, if they agreed not to undertake further violence. Swan encouraged Biya to improve communication about this kind of information.

US Business: DAS Swan said we hoped the U.S. company Hydromine's pending mining project would be approved and that this would help improve the economy. Biya knew about Hydromine but did not commit to moving the project forward. Biya praised the U.S. company AES, saying it had been necessary to privatize the state electricity company SONEL.

Elections: It was important for the 2011 elections to be credible, Biya said, adding that "even if I were crazy enough to run in 2011" there was no guarantee he would win.

Constitution: Biya reinforced that he was considering amending term limits in response to demands from the base of the ruling CPDM party. He allowed that he made a mistake in 1996 when he agreed to term limits. The opposition is so weak that the CPDM is the only truly national party that can speak for the majority of Cameroonians, he said. He stressed several times that Cameroon is "very fragile", with many ethnic, linguistic, and regional divisions that are difficult to manage. His four decades in government (25 as Head of State) had "not been a quiet period", he said, noting the coup attempt in 1984, the Bakassi border dispute with Nigeria, and the elections over the years. He added that currently there is significant infighting within his Cabinet.

It was essential to keep his options open about whether to run again in 2011, in order to defuse this internal jockeying for power, he asserted. He also said that in traditional African society, people do not announce the death of the chief until his successor has been decided.

More on the Constitution: When DAS Swan responded that we

have confidence in his ability to manage a transition in 2011, Biya underscored that he cannot manage the current very complicated situation if people around him see him as a lame duck. Term limits would not work in Cameroon, he stated, hoping that the US would not be too vocal on the constitutional term limit issue. DAS Swan assured him we did not intend to hammer him on this issue and that our public talking points were more mild and emphasized Cameroon's sovereignty on this decision. Swan suggested decoupling the issue of term limits from the question of amending succession mechanisms in the constitution such as creating a Vice President position. Biya said he would think about this but that naming a successor too early would raise the level of criticism against this person. He pointed to the case of his nomination of Rene Sadi as Secretary General of the CPDM, which people attacked as tantamount to naming a successor. The same would happen if he named a Vice President without changing term limits, he said.

Prime Minister Ephraim Inoni

¶5. (C) On March 7 and 8, DAS Swan had a series of separate meetings with the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and other senior government officials. PM Ephraim Inoni echoed Biya's explanation about the naming of new chiefs in African traditional society and asserted that the President was seeking to change term limits for the benefit of national peace. Inoni stressed the need for a credible, transparent electoral system, highlighting his consultations with the Commonwealth and domestic actors about the formation of an independent electoral commission (ELECAM). On press freedoms, Inoni justified the recent closing of Equinoxe because it was not registered and had not paid taxes. The PM admitted that he had a list of many other media outlets that also were not legally registered, but averred that he did not want to close them all. He would allow Equinoxe to restart if it pays its dues and offered to be helpful in resolving the problems with Magic FM, the VOA affiliate whose equipment was recently confiscated.

CPDM Secretary General Rene Sadi

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¶6. (C) Sadi blamed the recent violence on "malaise among the youth" and manipulation by those opposed to constitutional change, both within the main opposition SDF party and the CPDM itself. The government understands there are economic problems and frustrations, he said. He was not sure Biya would run in 2011 but stressed that the CPDM is the only broadly representative party in Cameroon and the only one capable of winning an election. Biya had no need to prove himself or make money but was motivated in eliminating term limits by a concern about shortcomings in the succession mechanisms and the possibility of chaos when he leaves the scene.

Foreign Minister Henri Eyebe Ayissi

¶7. (C) Ayissi described the recent riots as driven by economic frustrations, especially about the high cost of fuel. He dismissed the relevance of the constitutional debate but opined that the youth had been manipulated to stir up social disorder. Those subsequently arrested and the media outlets that were closed were in violation of laws. On the term limit issue, he underscored that this was a matter of sovereignty and that institutions need to be adapted to the situation of each country. Biya was within his legal rights under the constitution to submit a constitutional amendment to parliament and parliamentarians, as the representatives of the people, embodied broad societal consultation, he said. While supporting media freedom, he criticized some in the media for irresponsibly inciting

hatred.

Minister of Territorial Administration Hamidou Yaya Marafa

¶8. (C) Marafa thought the interneccine fighting within the Cabinet was "getting out of hand" and would lead to a Cabinet shuffle in the next few months. The opposition took advantage of the taxi strike to sow disruption, he said, adding that 38 people had died in the recent violence (on March 10 he announced the figure was 40). Marafa had pressed the President for several years to address the succession gaps in the constitution and was convinced that Biya needed to remove term limits to maintain the peace. Marafa saw the planned Cameroonian Electoral Commission (ELECAM) as flawed. In recent elections, too few people have registered and too few received voter ID cards. ELECAM would not have the technical capacity, personnel or financial wherewithal to address these problems, he said, preferring a national debate on the electoral process.

Governor of Littoral Francis Fai Yengo

¶9. (C) Fai Yengo said economic and political frustrations had been building in Douala (capital of Littoral Province) for some time. Many of the protesters were children, which made it difficult for the authorities to intervene, he said. The destruction was selective, which he was convinced indicated an organized effort. Things were calm now in Douala, he said, expressing confidence that recent salary raises and price adjustments would help keep the peace. He had banned demonstrations out of fear that they would lead to violence and he would maintain this ban until there were several weeks without demonstrations and he could be sure the situation was stable. He criticized Equinoxe's broadcasts as "beyond responsible" and said he would have shut it down if the minister had not. The riots had not disrupted port activities; this was confirmed in a later meeting with the Douala Port Director, although he acknowledged that some workers had difficulty getting to work during this period.

Civil Society and Business Views

¶10. (C) NGO leaders, media representatives, and other non-official sources were generally critical of Biya and his government. At a lunch in Yaounde, civil society representatives described Cameroon as a "volcano" ready to explode. Biya lacked credibility or legitimacy and was out of touch with the substantial misery and frustration of his people, they opined, adding that Cameroonian had no faith in the institutions of government. While three of the guests saw the potential for further dialogue and keeping the peace,

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Jean Claude Shanda Tonme, President of the Independent Commission Against Discrimination and Corruption, and a longstanding gadfly from the Bamileke community, stated it was too late for dialogue and that he and many others (even some within the government) were arguing and preparing for war.

¶11. (C) Civil society contacts in Douala were equally vocal about the shortcomings of the Biya government. While pessimistic about the future, noting that none of the issues driving the riots has been adequately addressed, they were less dramatic and bellicose than those in Yaounde. The recent violence was spontaneous, not organized, they argued, noting the prominent role of the youth in the riots. They disagreed on whether the President would seek to amend the constitution in the coming month, but all agreed that such a move could spur more violence. Business contacts, many with close links to the government, lamented the destruction of property and the negative effect on the investment climate of the recent violence, but were generally less vocal on the

criticism of the government. For the most part, they welcomed the new economic measures announced by President Biya on March 7, saying that civil service salary increases were long overdue.

¶12. (C) Douala-based Cardinal Christian Tumi, a longtime critic of the government, also saw the main cause of the recent violence as the country's "disastrous" economic situation. He thought the targeted nature of the unrest suggested support from well-educated youths but did not believe they were backed by political parties or were greatly motivated by the constitutional question. The fundamental problem in Cameroon is the lack of credible, well organized elections, he said, commenting that Biya's plans to change term limits were just an effort to prolong his grip on power. Biya does not care about his people and would be defeated in a free and fair election, Tumi opined, noting significant disaffection and frustration within the Anglophone community.

A French View

¶13. (C) French Ambassador to Cameroon Georges Serre believed that Biya was focused on his economic legacy, which was being stymied by an internal "war of succession," with an ethnic (anti-Bamileke) undertone. To handle this, Biya was very determined to eliminate term limits, which he has never liked. Serre was convinced, after many meetings with Biya, that the President would not run in the 2011 election. Instead, he would create a Vice Presidential post (most likely filled by Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Justice Amadou Ali) and groom him as a successor, Serre opined.

¶14. (C) The EU is reviewing a joint statement on Cameroon which Serre said would support the principle of alternance of power (though not term limits) and the need for good elections to consolidate democracy. As currently drafted, it calls for a national discussion and debate on constitutional change, underlines that the constitutional issue is ultimately a question of sovereignty, and reinforces the need for freedom of press and for supporting the less fortunate in society.

¶15. (C) Serre said he shared the view of a recent EU report on Cameroon that the country is in a period of instability. The army is loyal to Biya, but this could easily change, Serre said, adding that the military could not control the whole country. Biya is isolated and paranoid and has allowed only limited debate on the constitutional issue. He trusts the French much less than a year ago, Serre confided.

Comment

¶16. (C) Biya appeared to take Swan's message seriously and welcomed our private commentary on recent developments. His arguments were similar to those conveyed to the Ambassador in her January 31 meeting with the President. He professed a sense of weakness, repeatedly pointing to the fragility of the situation in the country and his inability to control the succession process without amending the constitution. Other officials also underscored strong U.S.-Cameroon relations and appeared to receive Swan's message in a spirit of friendship.

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¶17. (C) The visit highlighted the fundamental economic underpinnings of the recent riots. While officials stressed outside manipulation of youths, many outside of government (especially in Douala, the epicenter of the violence) saw last week's events as largely spontaneous. We were struck by the depth of anti-Biya sentiment shared by non-official contacts. Despite recent salary and price adjustments (which we will report septel), this suggests the real possibility of

more unrest in the future, especially if/when Biya submits his amendment to the constitution.

¶18. (U) DAS Swan cleared this cable.

GARVEY